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ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL RIGHTS

Written statement* submitted by the International Movement of Apostolate in the Independent Social Milieux, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[16 December 1999]

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* This written statement is issued, unedited, as received from the submitting non-governmental organization.

1. The relationship between action to combat poverty, the search for greater social justice, and the establishment of universal and lasting peace is laid down in the 1919 Constitution of the League of Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and the preambles to the International Covenants of 1996. However, for a long time, the United Nations system has considered extreme poverty to be an economic phenomenon, coming under human needs, and not as a violation of all human rights, as was pointed out by Father Joseph Wresinski to the Commission on Human Rights in 1987.

2. Fortunately, the efforts of the General Assembly and the Commission since the 1990s, the World Conference on Human Rights (Vienna, 1993) and the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995) have led States to declare that the eradication of extreme poverty was becoming a necessary and priority action in the world. As a result, the period 1997-2006 was declared the United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty.

3. We welcome all these efforts to highlight this humanitarian ideal, but mankind does not expect it to be realized in the near future. According to the UNDP report for 1997, and as we ourselves said at the fifty-fourth session of the Commission, "We are the first generation to have the human, technical and financial capabilities to eradicate extreme poverty in one generation". We have spread this good news throughout our 35 movements and everywhere around us, but we also would like to put this question to the conscience of mankind: "We are the first generation with the ability to eradicate poverty, but will we be the first with the will to do it, the first actually to do it?"

We believe that this desire coupled with action must be included on the agenda of the Commission's fifty-sixth session, as indeed we hope they will be incorporated in the evaluation of the World Summit for Social Development to be held next June.

We know that this will not be simple. We are aware of the considerable opposition that has been mounted by certain covert interests in this body and by short-sighted calculations that pay little heed to future generations. We know that in the international community there are individuals, NGOs and States that believe in the strength of human rights, both in will and action. We also know that we will have to overcome the lack of public faith, fatalism and corporatism. That is where the mission of our movement - the International Movement of Apostolate in the Independent Social Milieux (MIAMSI) - comes into play; our aim is to sensitize our social milieux and those in which the major players of civil society, politics and NGOs are to be found at the local, national and international levels.

4. We have been modestly but firmly involved in these tasks of awareness and conscience-raising, empowerment and evangelization for more than 50 years. Over the last few years we have included the promotion of human rights, with emphasis on poverty and universal solidarity, among our priorities.

5. With respect to the research and action that we undertake in this sensitization to poverty, we would simply mention one for each region:

Our assembly in Latin America centred on the right to work: "human dignity is achieved through the right to work". Deprivation of work, unsuitable work and work done in

inhuman conditions affect health, education, leisure and family life. In other words, the main economic, social and cultural rights of the vast numbers of people concerned in Latin America are affected.

At the two meetings which brought together delegates from our movements in South Africa, Madagascar, Mauritius, the Seychelles and Reunion, the discussion focused on the situation of regional migrant workers, from the economic and human points of view. All the countries of this region have more or less successfully established market economies. Often, this has increased material and human poverty rather than reduced it, as was promised. Migration of labour is one of the solutions promoted by companies because of the presence of free zones. Our movements are of the opinion that migration of labour should not be to the detriment of workers' rights, and they have conducted a survey on their situation. Challenges have been issued and public opinion questioned. We hope that the Commission on Human Rights will continue to awaken the conscience of mankind.

During the general elections in India, our movement worked alongside Christians in order to raise their civic awareness regarding respect for human rights, in connection with the caste system and the rights of Christian dalits.

Our European movements have all joined the Jubilee 2000 debt cancellation campaign. They have supported NGOs in their "Putting Life Before Debt" motion which they presented to the Council of Europe. The reduction, or even cancellation, of the external debt of the world's poorest countries is not just an ethical issue, it is also a question of good governance of the world economy and of the economies of the countries concerned. It is also a question of long-term profitability for creditor countries. However, there is need for increased international efforts in this regard. Many of our people in Europe are willing to shoulder a share of the financial burden relating to debt cancellation, on condition that these resources are used for the realization of economic, social and cultural rights, and not to swell corruption. Reducing poverty will favour the sustainable growth of the world economy.

Other situations observed in various countries, all linked to poverty, such as corruption, violence and illegal immigration, contribute to a lack of satisfaction among all our populations, even in the more affluent milieux with which we are in contact.

6. In our efforts to raise awareness of human rights, especially economic, social and cultural rights which are less well-known, in our attempts to change collective attitudes and local, national and international structures so as to achieve greater practical and tangible respect for human rights, we must bear in mind the diversity of the people we address. They do not live in extreme poverty; many of them are rich. Generally speaking they have the means, the knowledge and the power, but have different attitudes to human rights and poverty.

Some are very much at ease with liberal thought; the terms "freedom", "individuals" and "individual responsibility" form the basis of their view of human rights and the way in which the world operates.

Others think that fundamental freedoms and human rights can only be enjoyed through collective contracts, domestic laws, and international conventions and covenants.

Some approve and others disapprove of attempts to shield the operation of the world economy from the regulatory mechanisms that the world tries to establish.

Some have an almost religious belief that the race for unending profits will lead to growth in wealth from which the poor will also benefit.

Others think that other mechanisms need to be implemented in order to enable all mankind to benefit immediately from recent technological progress.

We have been engaging in dialogue with these different groups to inform them of the efforts being made by international bodies, such as this Commission in conjunction with other United Nations agencies, in order to enable them to feel part of these efforts and increasingly to consider themselves as citizens of the world in addition to being local and national citizens, so that they will fill the gaps in their knowledge of human rights.

7. For a short time now, in our discussions with them, we have been stressing an idea which has been gaining ground in national and international organizations (Economic and Social Council, UNDP, Council of Europe, etc.) and which we owe largely to Father J. Wresinski and to the International Movement ATD Fourth World. That is the poor and the excluded should be allowed the right to express their needs and proposals themselves (see report on human rights and extreme poverty by Léandro Despouy; E/CN.4/Sub.2/1996/13).

8. For the year 1999/2000, our international campaign of analysis and action is entitled "How do we use our freedom to contribute to eradicating poverty and thereby build a world of greater solidarity, a world such as God wishes?" We are thus inviting our movements to become more involved in the fight against poverty, by being creative and proposing original and specific alternatives.

9. Our congress to be held in October 2000 will allow our members to compare the situations, initiatives and proposals from different continents on the topics of poverty, solidarity and justice, and to mobilize in order to tackle this enormous challenge.

This is why we are calling on the Commission to further extend its efforts in this regard and adopt resolutions which will enable States to be addressed by the poor people themselves and to take action in the framework of the United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty.

10. We are calling on the Commission to encourage States to give an account, at the fifty-seventh session, of their decisions relating to the ability, the will and action to commence and continue poverty eradication.

11. We welcome the progress made in terms of coordination between all international bodies so that each in its area makes a more effective contribution to taking up the great challenge of poverty eradication. The enjoyment of all our rights depends on it.

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